El Al Passengers Praise the Crew

NEW YORK (AP) — Amid cheers and screams of joy and relief, almost 500 waiting friends and relatives embraced loved ones early today as they debarked from a hijacked El Al jetliner at Kennedy Airport.

As the first of the 148 passengers cleared customs, they joined a group of waiting youths to form a circle and dance the hora while singing Israeli folk songs.

Within minutes, almost everyone in the International Arrivals Building joined in the singing—celebrating the happy end to a tension-packed flight.

The 707 jetliner, one of four New York-bound planes hijacked yesterday, avoided being diverted to the Middle East when one hijacker was killed and his female companion wounded in a gun battle over England.

Bravery Extolled

Many passengers praised the bravery of Shlomo Vider, a steward, who was wounded in the clash. They also cited the stewardesses who kept up spirits by leading them in songs.

The hijack attempt occurred as the plane took off from Amsterdam after an intermediate stop. In interviews at Kennedy and at London's Heathrow Airport, where the plane landed after the emergency, passengers gave this account of the flight.

May Shark, 60, of New York, said the hijackers boarded the plane in Amsterdam and sat next to her.

"Suddenly, right out of the blue, they stood up and rushed headlong through the dividing curtain toward the pilot's cabin," Mrs. Shark said. "All the time they were screaming.

"Beat On Pilot's Door"

"They had with them three hand grenades and what looked like a black shiny cap gun. They beat with the gun on the pilot's door.

"They carried on screaming. But before they could make their entry an El Al steward stepped in. Immediately he was smashed across the face with the butt of the gun and knocked out."

Another passenger, Harry Hamel, a hotel keeper from Massachusetts, gave this version:

"I was sitting in the front seat when these two rushed up. For a moment I was transfixed and then one of the passengers got up from his seat and attacked the girl hijacker. He held her by the wrists from behind so that she could not move. I think he saved us all."

A man who many passengers said was the hero declined to give his name but he recounted, "All of a sudden two shots rang out and we all thought that the pilot had had it. Nevertheless, after what seemed 10 years the aircraft seemed to correct its flight and head down for Heathrow."

Scotland Yard's special branch detectives met the plane in London and FBI agents were on hand in New York.